

Seeds of change

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This week will see the unveiling of 12 striking animal heads cast in bronze, in the handsome 18th-century courtyard of London's Somerset House. The "Circle of Animals", as it styles itself, has connections with the same historical era. They are gigantic recreations of the Zodiac sculptures that once adorned the fountain-clock of Yuanming Yuan, an 18th-century imperial retreat outside Beijing. The last thing they look like is a contemporary art installation but that is exactly what they are.

The creator of the animal heads is the [Chinese artist Ai Weiwei](#), a man whose playful and provocative way with his art has led him into serious trouble in his homeland. Ai was arrested earlier this year and has been accused of unspecified economic crimes. But international observers fear that the real reason for his detention is his consistent criticism of the Chinese government.

A widespread international campaign has thrust Ai's name into prominence. From London's riverside, we can observe the slogan "Release Ai Weiwei" on the side of Tate Modern. The [sculptor Anish Kapoor](#) has dedicated his new commission at the Grand Palais in Paris to Ai. "His arrest, disappearance and alleged torture are unacceptable. When governments silence artists it bears witness to their barbarity," Kapoor said.

It is difficult to discern any political resonance in Ai's work from the startled bronze heads of Somerset House. The original heads were pillaged when Yuanming Yuan was ransacked by French and British troops in 1860 and there have been fervent official attempts to buy them back – for instance, at last year's [Yves Saint Laurent sale](#). Only seven of the 12 originals have been located, and "Circle of Animals" might have been a none-too-subtle appeal for their repatriation.

Ai has all but explicitly denied this interpretation of his work. "My work is always dealing with real or fake, authenticity and value," he has explained. What he really cares about is showing his art to a wide public. "It's a work that everyone can understand, including children and people who are not in the art world," he said.

Although it is styled according to 18th-century aesthetics, "Circle of Animals" is, in fact, more typical of the age in which it has been produced: the present. It has the feel of a visual joke. Its references to any controversy over the original heads are allusive. There is no polemical grandstanding going on, no bombast. Part of the joke is the freshly sumptuous setting of the work, the courtyard that was until very recently a civil service car park. Sure, art can be looted; but it can also be neutralised by the banal imperatives of bureaucracy.

Ai's playfulness as evidenced here, and in Tate Modern's installation "Sunflower Seeds", make it difficult to see him as the rebellious artist causing such discomfort to the Chinese authorities (although other works are far more explicit in their critique of the government). The messages contained in his London work are subtle, with wide conceptual nuances at play.

At his Tate press conference, Ai encouraged visitors to tweet their reactions to the piece, which consisted of 100m porcelain "seeds". He declined to make his intentions any more explicit than that. But here is what he might have said: "Seeds grow. Tweets reverberate. The crowd will have its way, eventually." The opening of "Sunflower Seeds" last year failed to make the Chinese authorities overly nervous. But the events of the Arab spring certainly did. The green shoots of popular revolt proved to be even more abrasive than all that porcelain dust. And Ai was duly taken into custody.

As China continues to develop in ways that are strange and unpredictable, we grope for some certainties. In a puzzling and rising world where monolithic state power is twinned with extreme capitalism, and communism coexists with Bordeaux-drinking oligarchs, the figure of the outspoken artist sacrificing himself for his beliefs is at least a familiar one.

This explains the intensity of feeling surrounding the arrest of Ai Weiwei. Culture has become a forum for the west to express its misgivings over the resurgent east. The art world can say things that the business or political communities, more pragmatic in their concerns, can't afford to say.

On Wednesday night, these themes will be aired in central London's most glamorous former car park as that same art world celebrates the opening of "Circle of Heads". Gwyn Miles, director of Somerset House Trust, said there had been a good deal of debate over whether an opening night party was appropriate. "But if you look at everything [Ai] has said, he would want us to have a party," she said. "What he wouldn't want to be is forgotten."

'Circle of Animals: Zodiac Heads' Somerset House, London, May 12 - June 26